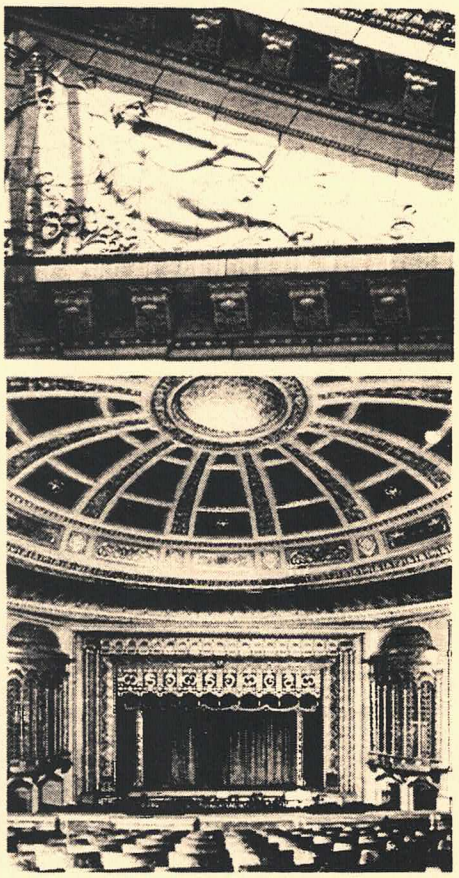
LANDMARK DESIGNATION REPORT



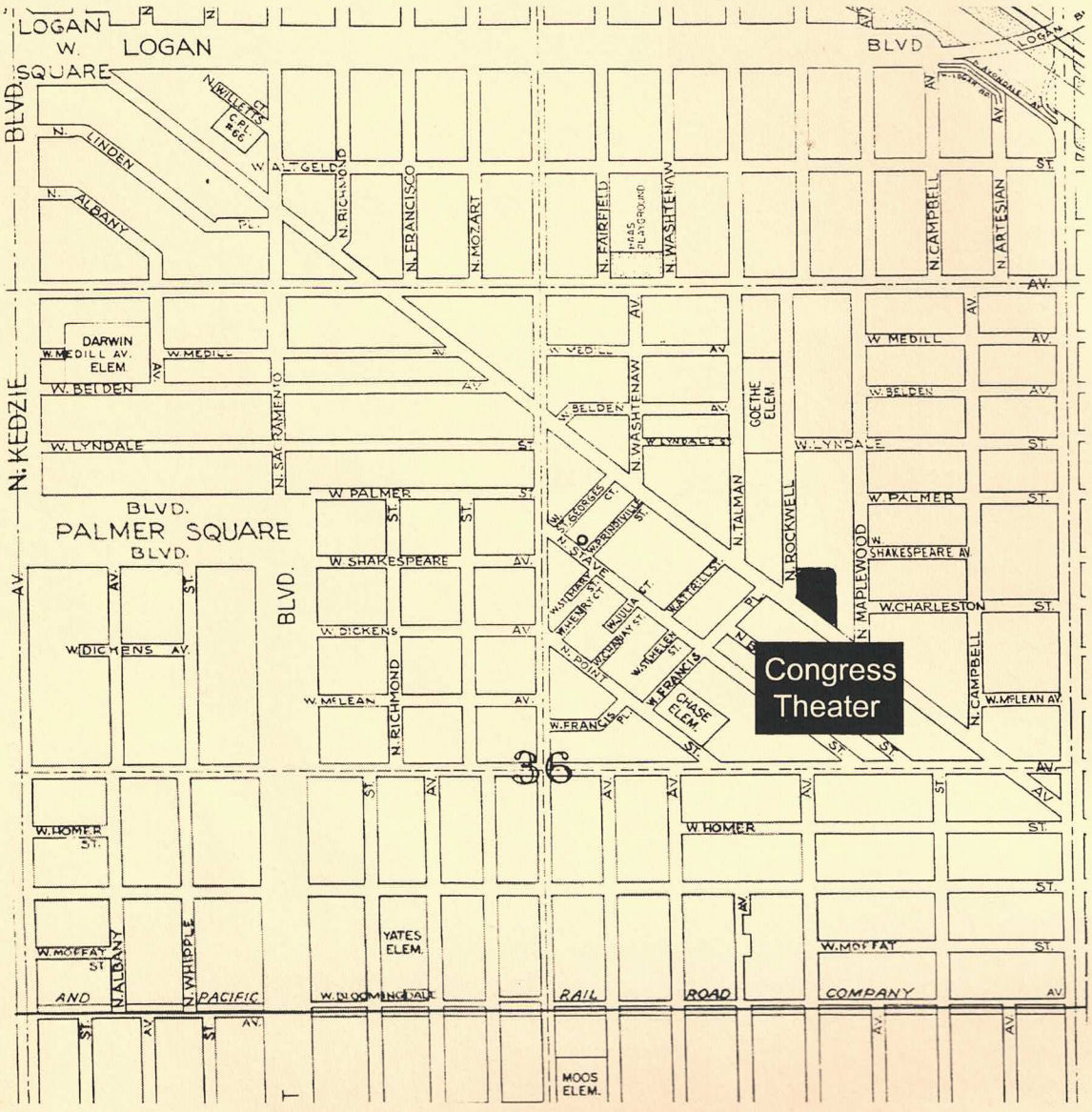
Congress Theater

2117-39 N. Milwaukee Ave./2117-39 N. Rockwell Ave.

Preliminary Landmark recommendation approved by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, August 2, 2000

CITY OF CHICAGO
Richard M. Daley, Mayor

Department of Planning and Development
Alicia Mazur Berg, Commissioner



Above: The Congress Theater is located on North Milwaukee Avenue in the Logan Square community area of Chicago.

Cover: A 1926 photograph of the Congress Theater (left). The theater facade is ornamented with Classical Revival-style terra cotta (top right). The theater auditorium retains most of the features seen in this 1926 photograph, including the proscenium arch, flanking organ grilles, and overarching plaster dome.

The Commission on Chicago Landmarks, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, was established in 1968 by city ordinance. The Commission is responsible for recommending to the City Council which individual buildings, sites, objects, or districts should be designated as Chicago Landmarks, which protects them by law.

The landmark designation process begins with a staff study and a preliminary summary of information related to the potential designation criteria. The next step is a preliminary vote by the landmarks commission as to whether the proposed landmark is worthy of consideration. This vote not only initiates the formal designation process, but it places the review of city permits for the property under the jurisdiction of the Commission until a final landmark recommendation is acted on by the City Council.

This Landmark Designation Report is subject to possible revision and amendment during the designation process. Only language contained within the designation ordinance adopted by the City Council should be regarded as final.

Congress Theater

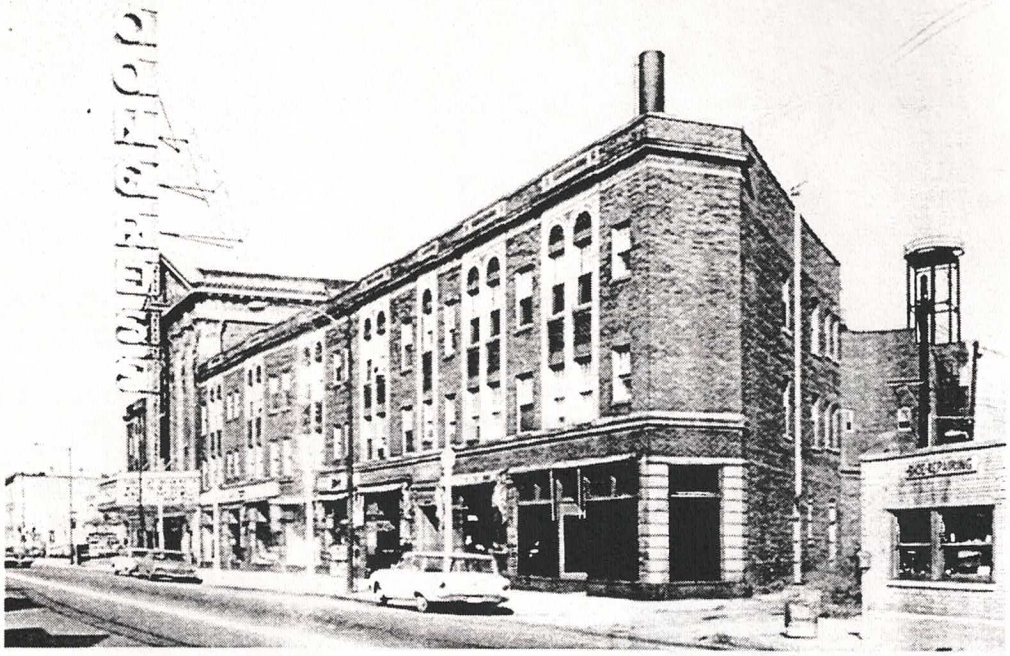
2117-39 N. Milwaukee Ave./
2117-39 N. Rockwell Ave.

Built: **1925-26**
Architect: **Fridstein & Co.**

The Congress Theater, with its 2,904-seat auditorium, is one of the most intact surviving neighborhood movie "palaces" in Chicago dating from the boom years of the 1920s. It is one of the last remaining theaters associated with Lubliner & Trinz, the operators of one of Chicago's largest chains of "moving picture theaters" during the 1920s. It has served for decades as a cultural and entertainment center for Chicago's Near Northwest Side, housing movies, stage shows, and special events.

Covering a quarter of a city block, the three-story building is an excellent example of a "theater-block," a building type combining a movie theater with stores and apartments. Its elaborate four-story theater entrance is an outstanding example of detailing and craftsmanship in terra cotta, designed in a combination of the Classical Revival and Italian Renaissance architectural styles.

The Congress Theater's interior is noteworthy for the lavishness, in both space and detailing, of its lobbies and auditorium. The two major spaces, the four-story main lobby and the auditorium with its dramatic saucer dome, are remarkably intact. Most historic features remain, including decorative stone- and plasterwork, metal chandeliers and sconces, and auditorium seating.



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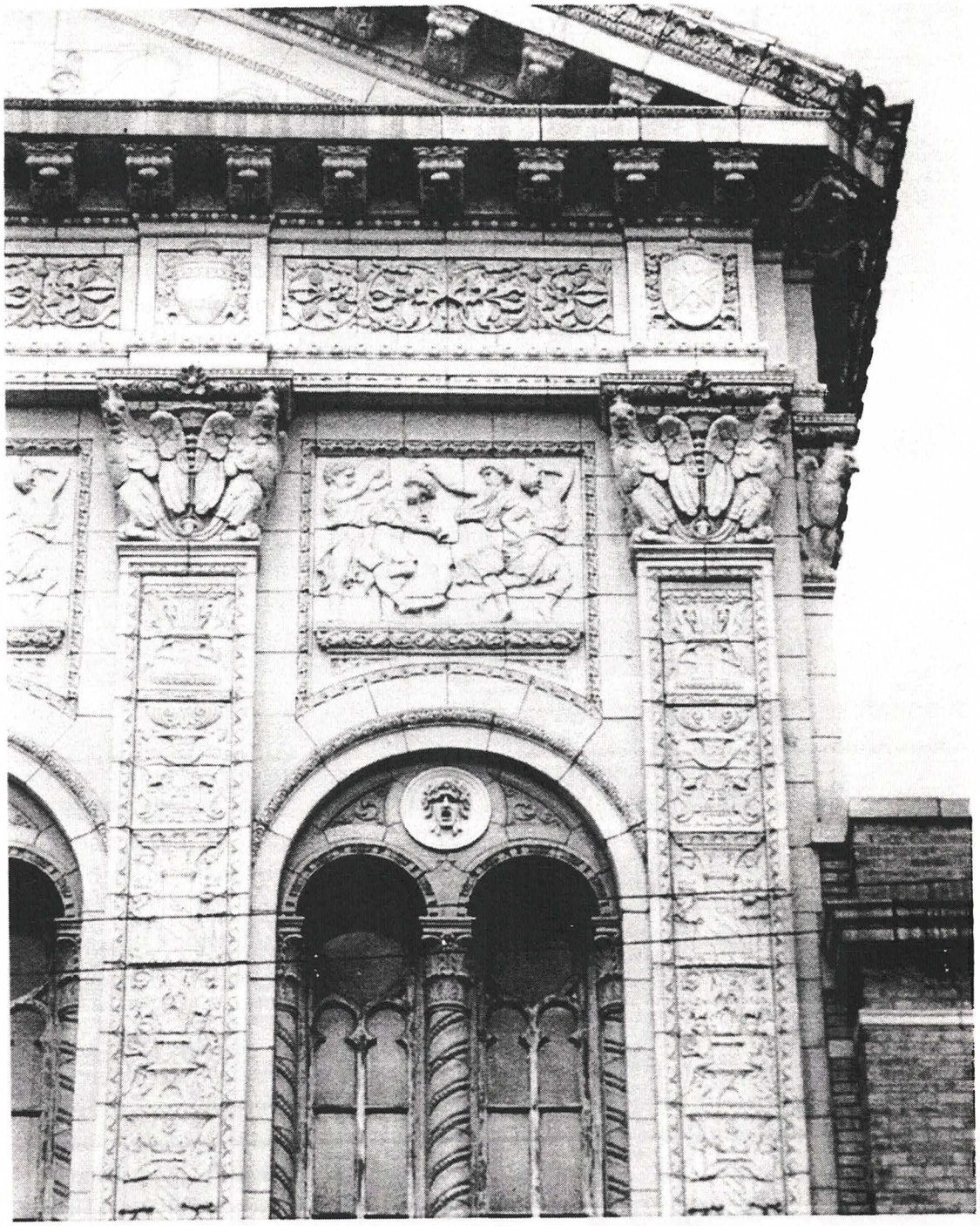


Opposite top: The Congress Theater is a large "theater block," comprised of a large auditorium set behind an L-shaped block of ground-level storefronts and upper-floor apartments. This 1968 photograph shows the theater's giant vertical sign still in place.

Opposite bottom: The main theater entrance, at 2135 N. Milwaukee Ave., has a dramatic four-story terra-cotta facade and projecting marquee.

Top: The building's terra cotta, beautifully detailed in a combination of Italian Renaissance and Classical Revival styles, was produced by Chicago's Northwestern Terra Cotta Company.

Early Chicago Movie Theaters

The first movie houses in Chicago, built in the first decade of the twentieth century, were family-owned storefront operations, known as nickelodeons after the common price of admission, that made use of rudimentary projection equipment and seating. In spite of unsophisticated surroundings and presentations, these early movie theaters attracted ever increasing audiences, spurred by the rise of the motion picture industry and the creation of full-length movies such as *The Great Train Robbery*, filmed in 1903.

By the 1910s, "purpose-built" movie theaters, or buildings designed expressly for the showing of motion pictures, began to be built in Chicago. Although larger than nickelodeons, these theaters remained relatively small in scale, fitting easily into neighborhood commercial strips developing in Chicago's many neighborhoods. The vast majority of these first-generation movie theaters have been demolished or remodeled for other purposes. One that remains is the Biograph Theater, constructed in 1914 (designated a Chicago Landmark in 2001).

By the 1920s, Chicago was "the jumpingest movie city in the world and had more plush elegant theatres than anywhere else," according to movie historian Ben Hall. The demand for motion pictures encouraged the construction of large-scale theaters holding between 2000 and 4000 movie-goers. Built by major theater operators such as Balaban and Katz, Lubliner and Trinz, and the Marks Brothers, these movie "palaces," including the Congress Theater, were major centers of entertainment both in the Loop and outlying neighborhoods.

Meant to create an environment of fantastic illusion for movie patrons, a movie "palace" took its design cues from historic architectural revival styles such as Renaissance and Baroque. Its facade would be richly detailed with terra cotta while a lighted marquee and giant sign proclaimed the theater's presence for blocks. Upon entering, a patron experienced a grand lobby, sweeping staircases, and lavish auditorium. With interiors detailed with elaborate stone and plaster work, decorative metal light fixtures, and plush seats, these theaters became in effect extensions of the films being shown, with their often exotic storylines and locales.

By the end of the 1920s, Chicago had more than 30 of these movie "palace" theaters, including the Chicago, Uptown, and New Regal

More than 30 movie "palaces" once graced Chicago's neighborhoods. Most have been demolished, including the West Side's Paradise (top) at 231 N. Pulaski Rd., the Granada (above left), located on N. Sheridan Rd. in the Far North Side Rogers Park community area, and the Tivoli (above right) at 63rd St. and Cottage Grove Ave. in the South Side neighborhood of Woodlawn.

Theaters (designated Chicago Landmarks in 1983, 1991, and 1992, respectively). Beginning in the 1950s, however, a decline in movie going, coupled with suburban development and changing motion picture exhibition practice, led to the construction of smaller movie theaters clustered in "multiplexes" and the destruction or drastic remodeling of most of these grandly scaled movie theaters. Very few movie "palace" theaters remain in Chicago's neighborhoods; the Congress Theater is one of the finest and most intact.

History and Description of the Congress Theater

The Congress Theater was designed in 1925 for Lubliner & Trinz, who operated one of Chicago's largest movie theater chains during the 1920s. The theater opened on September 5, 1926. Besides showing movies, the theater also was part of the prestigious Orpheum Circuit, a nationwide group of vaudeville houses.

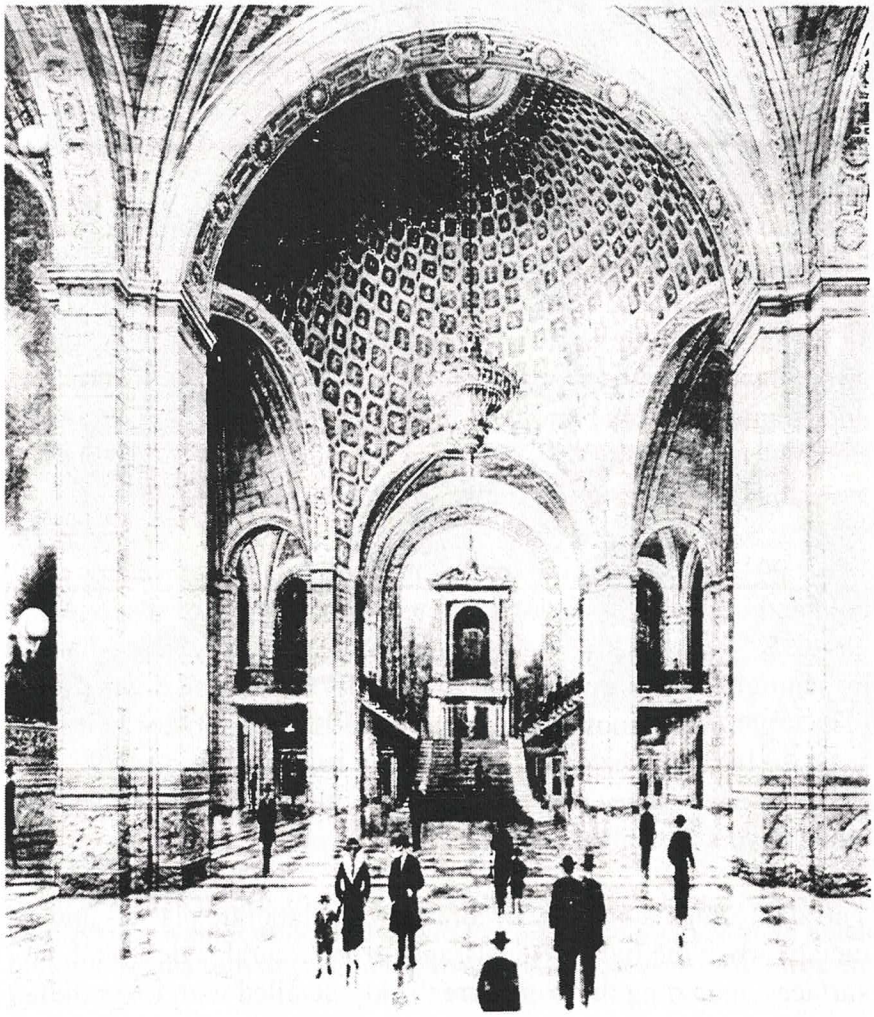
The theater's architect was Fridstein & Co., an architectural-engineering company founded in 1916 by structural engineer Meyer Fridstein. Fridstein & Co.'s other designs of note include the Belden Stratford Hotel at 2300 N. Lincoln Park West and the Shoreland Hotel at 5454 South Shore Drive (both listed on the National Register of Historic Places). Besides the Congress, Fridstein & Co. also designed two other movie theaters, the Harding Theater at 2712 N. Milwaukee Avenue (demolished 1960) and the Tower Theater at 1510 E. 63rd Street (demolished 1957).

Lubliner & Trinz sold their theaters, including the Congress, to rival theater operators Balaban & Katz in 1929. The Congress continued to show movies under the management of this and other companies through the 1980s. In recent years, it has been a venue for concerts, movie festivals, talent shows, and other events.

Located at the northeast corner of Milwaukee and Rockwell Avenues, the Congress Theater is a large-scale building covering a quarter of a city block. The theater auditorium itself, a massive brick presence, sits at the back of the lot. A three-story "L"-shaped wing, facing both streets and containing the theater's lobby plus 17 stores and 56 apartments, wraps around the auditorium.

The Congress Theater is built of brown brick with white terra cotta trim. The theater entrance is dramatic, with a four-story terra-cotta

Fridstein and Co., the designers of the Congress Theater, designed a number of other notable buildings in Chicago, including the Shoreland Hotel (above) in the Hyde Park neighborhood and the Harding (left) and Tower (bottom) movie theaters (both demolished).



facade detailed with a Classical Revival-style pediment and Italian Renaissance-style windows, pilasters, and low-relief ornament. Before starting his own firm, Fridstein had worked for the noted architectural firm of Marshall and Fox, and the influence of Benjamin Marshall's designs of elaborate terra cotta-detailed buildings such as the Blackstone Hotel and the 1550 N. State apartment building can be seen in Fridstein's treatment of the Congress Theater facade. Multi-paned theater doors are flanked by decorative signboard frames.

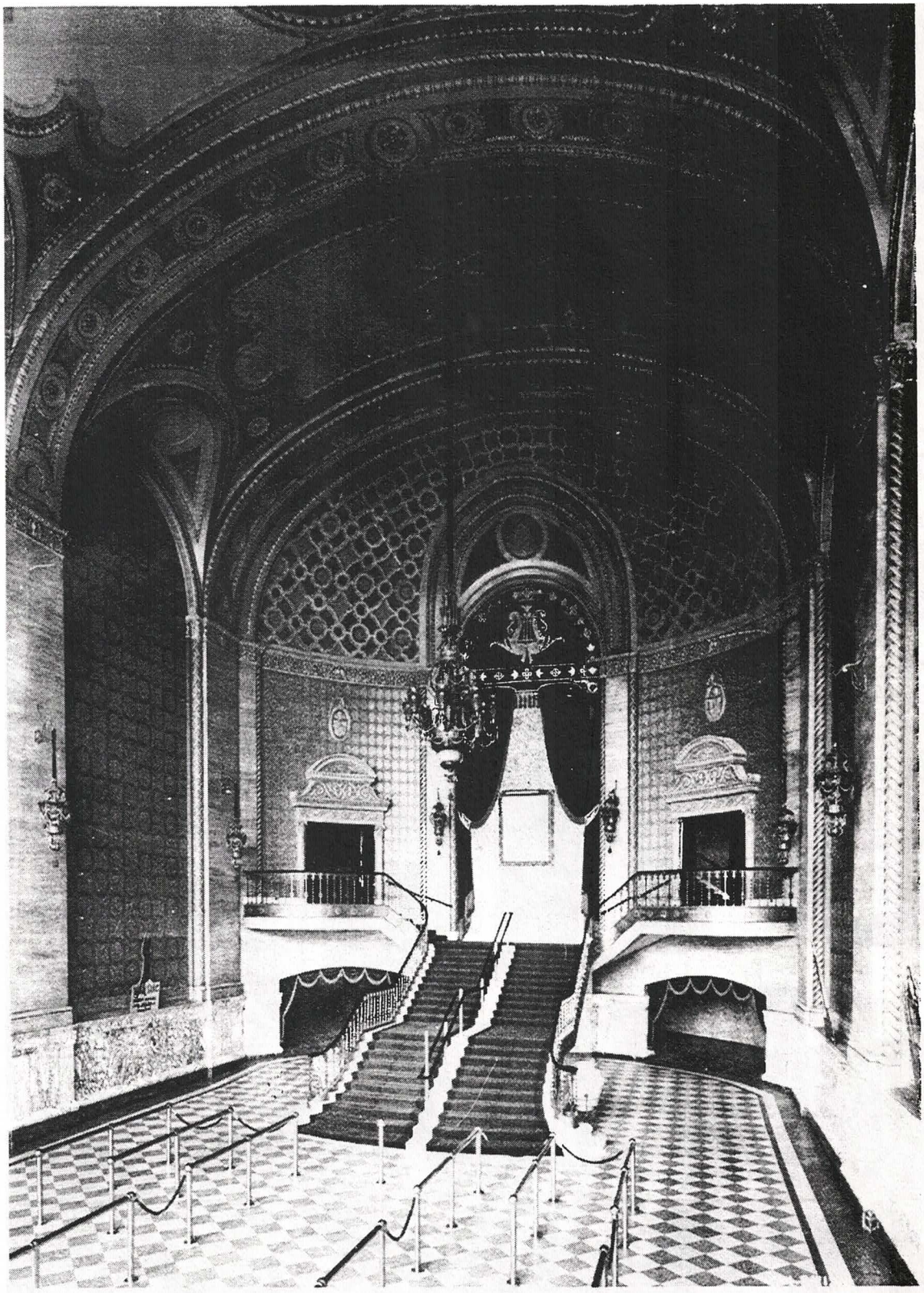
The store-apartment sections are simply detailed with white terra-cotta window surrounds and decorative raised brickwork. In addition, white terra cotta is used to highlight the theater's secondary entrance facing Rockwell.

The theater interior is a lavish sequence of spaces, handsomely detailed with decorative stone- and plasterwork. Theatergoers enter a small outer vestibule with two marble-and-gilt iron box office booths. The outer vestibule has a glass roof (now opaque with paint) that originally allowed views up into the main lobby beyond, a dramatic four-story space with an arched ceiling decorated with Italian Renaissance-style moldings. Black, gray and light brown marble is used for wainscoting while the floor is composed of green and off-white marbleized terrazzo squares arranged in a checkerboard pattern. Two iron-and-glass chandeliers hang from the ceiling, accompanied by smaller wall fixtures.

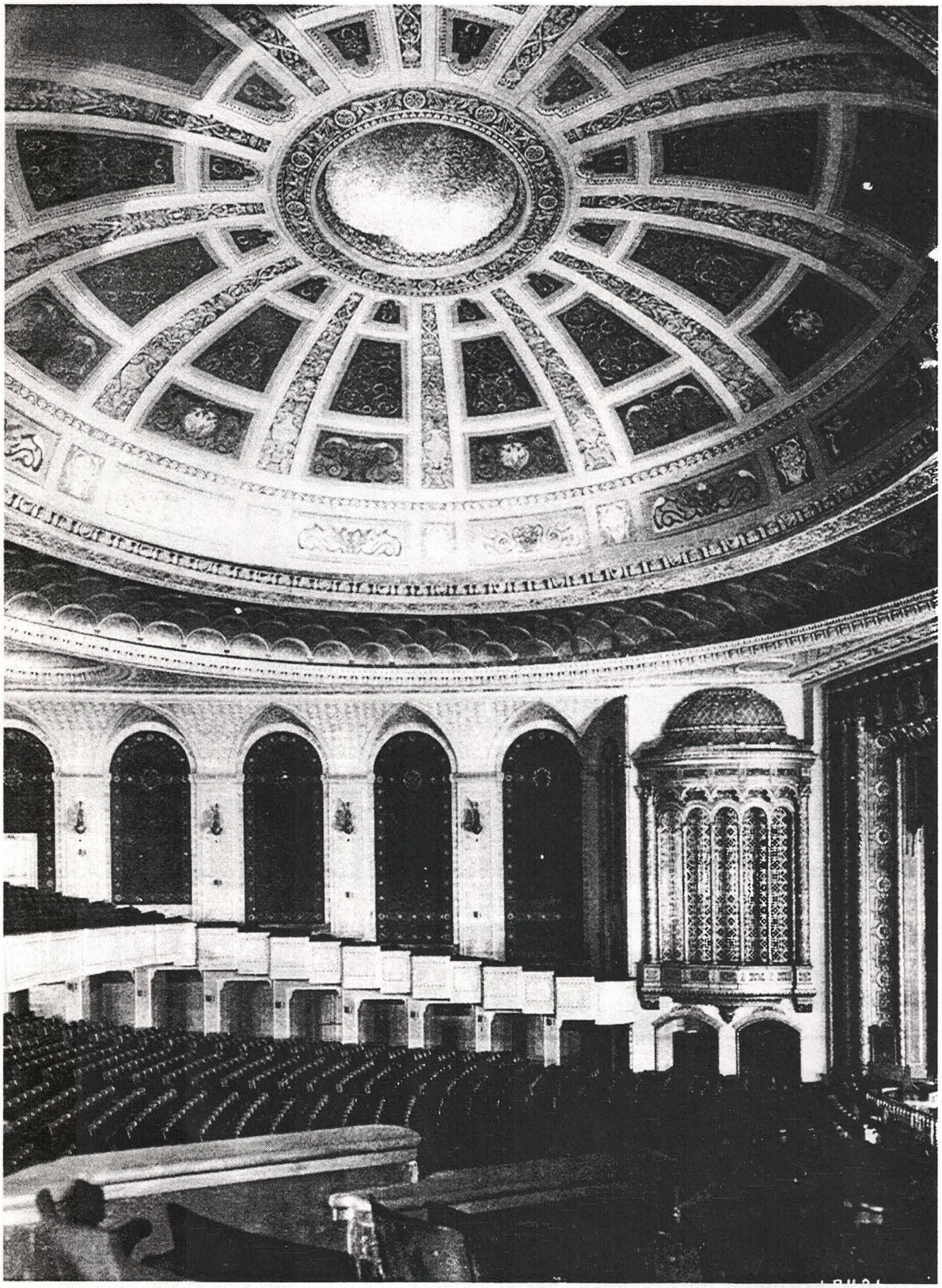
At the far end of the main lobby, a grand staircase draws visitors through two doorways, ornamented with elaborate pedimented door frames, that lead into a narrow inner lobby, then the auditorium balcony. Flanking the staircase are two flat-arched passageways that lead to a similar lobby serving the orchestra level.

The 2,904-seat auditorium, retaining its original color scheme of gold and burgundy, is dramatic in its expansive use of space. A large 55-foot-wide proscenium arch dominates the far wall, flanked by semi-circular projecting bays originally containing organ pipes. (The organ was removed in the early 1930s.) The orchestra level seats 2,114 while the encircling balcony has an additional 790 seats. Arched niches ring the balcony while a three-tiered saucer dome covers the entire ceiling.

The auditorium is lavishly decorated with elaborate plaster- and metalwork in the Italian Renaissance architectural style. Wall surfaces, including the dome, are thickly detailed with low-relief



Seen in a 1926 photo, the Congress Theater's main lobby is grandly scaled and detailed with marble wainscoting and Italian Renaissance Revival-style plaster moldings. Most historic details remain, including the iron-and-glass light fixtures and checkerboard-pattern floor.



Seating 2,904, the theater auditorium retains the historic details seen in this 1926 photograph, including the balcony, organ grilles, ceiling dome, and low-relief plaster ornament. Much of the auditorium's original color scheme of gold, burgundy, and blue remains.

ornament such as foliate motifs, swags, urns, fans, and rosettes. Doorways into the balcony are set within frames finely detailed with spiral columns supporting decorative cornices. Original iron-and-glass light fixtures remain in place along the walls.

The Congress Theater was recognized as "significant to the community" by the *Chicago Historic Resources Survey* (1996). It was included in *Great American Movie Theaters*, published by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1987. The Theatre Historical Society of America, a national organization devoted to theater history and preservation, has published two issues of its *Marquee* magazine (Second Quarter 1985 and First Quarter 1992) featuring the Congress.

Criteria for Designation

According to the Municipal Code of Chicago (Sect. 2-120-620 and -690), the Commission on Chicago Landmarks has the authority to make a final recommendation of landmark designation for a building, structure, or district if the Commission determines it meets at least two of the stated "criteria for landmark designation," as well as possesses a significant degree of its historic design integrity.

The following should be considered by the Commission on Chicago Landmarks in determining whether to recommend that the Congress Theater be designated as a Chicago Landmark.

Criterion 1: Critical Part of the City's History

Its value as an example of the architectural, cultural, economic, historic, social or other aspect of the heritage of the City of Chicago, the State of Illinois, or the United States.

- The Congress Theater, with its 2,904-seat auditorium, is one of the most intact surviving neighborhood movie "palaces" in Chicago dating from the boom years of the 1920s. More than 30 movie theaters of similar size and lavishness once existed in the city's neighborhoods; fewer than a half-dozen remain.
- The Congress is one of the last remaining theaters associated with Lubliner & Trinz, the operators of one of Chicago's largest chains of "moving picture theaters" during the 1920s. The company owned more than a dozen movie theaters in Chicago before becoming part of the

Balaban & Katz movie theater chain in 1929.

- The Congress has served for decades as a cultural and entertainment center for Chicago's Near Northwest Side, showcasing "high-class vaudeville" and "first-run photoplays" in its early years and music concerts, talent shows, and special events more recently.

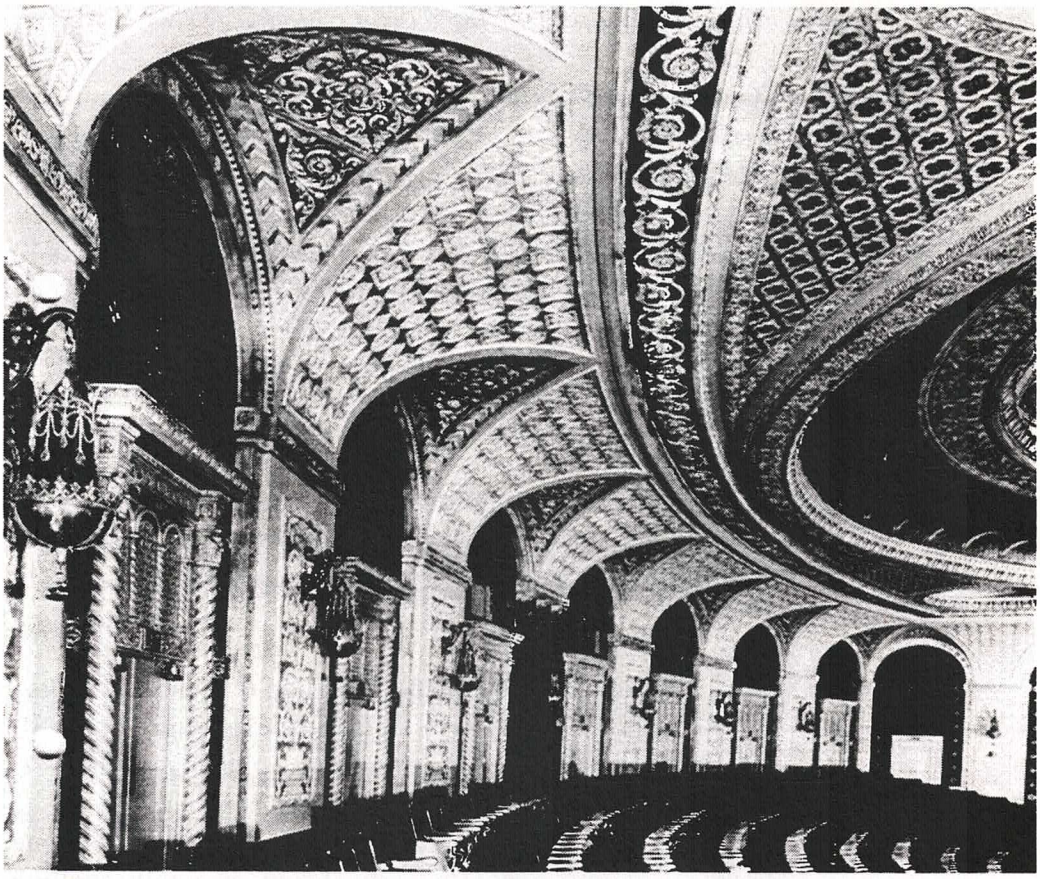
Criterion 4: Important Architecture

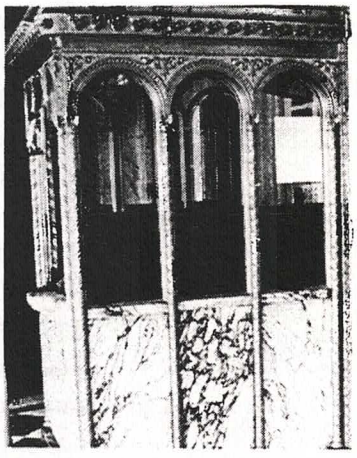
Its exemplification of an architectural type or style distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.

- The Congress Theater is an excellent, intact example of a "theater-block," a building type combining a movie theater with stores and apartments. Massive in scale, the three-story building covers a quarter of a city block and contains a 2,904-seat theater, 17 stores and 56 apartments.
- The Congress' elaborate four-story theater entrance is an outstanding example of ornament and craftsmanship in terra cotta. Its fine details, including pilasters, low-relief sculptures, round-arched windows, and triangular pediment, are designed in a combination of the Classical Revival and Italian Renaissance architectural styles.
- The theater interior forms a grand progression of spaces noteworthy for its visual lavishness. An outer glass-roofed vestibule retains original doors and plasterwork, plus two ornate ticket booths. The four-story main lobby has marble wainscoting, ornately plastered vaulted ceilings, and a grand staircase leading to the auditorium. The auditorium itself, retaining its original color scheme of gold and burgundy, is visually dominated by a large proscenium arch and saucer dome. Wall surfaces are ornamented with plaster detailing in an elaborate variation of the Italian Renaissance architectural style.
- The Congress Theater interior is noteworthy for being remarkably intact and is one of the city's few remaining neighborhood theater interiors to survive. Most of the theater's historic interior features remain, including both decorative wall surfaces and building elements such as ticket booths, doors, staircases, and light fixtures.

Criterion 7: Unique Visual Feature

Its unique location or distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a





The Congress Theater has exceptional design integrity, retaining the vast majority of the features seen in 1926 photographs of its auditorium (top) and main lobby (left). The glass-topped outer vestibule (seen in the lobby photograph) retains two original iron-and -marble box offices (above).

neighborhood, community, or the City of Chicago.

- The Congress Theater's prominent location along a one-block-long section of North Milwaukee Avenue is visible to tens of thousands of people daily, including passengers on the elevated tracks of the Blue Line across Milwaukee.
- The building's visually dominant theater entrance towers over Milwaukee Avenue, a major thoroughfare, and the massive wedge-shaped theater block provides a distinct physical anchor for the surrounding neighborhood.

Integrity Criterion

The integrity of the proposed landmark must be preserved in light of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship and ability to express its historic community, architectural or aesthetic interest or value.

- The Congress Theater entrance pavilion retains most of its elements, including its terra-cotta facade, entrance doors and signboard frames. The white terra cotta around the ground level of the theater entrance has been painted red and gold. The original marquee has been replaced with one similar in overall size. The vertical sign, originally spelling "Congress," retains its steel frame but the letters were removed in 1982.
- The theater's interior is phenomenal in the survival of almost all of its significant features. The sequence of significant spaces (outer vestibule, main and inner lobbies, and auditorium) remains intact. Important building elements, including doors, light fixtures, main lobby flooring, and decorative wall surfaces, remain intact as well. Among the very few changes: the outer vestibule's glass roof is painted over, a candy counter was added to the main lobby, and acoustic material added in the early 1930s covers a small portion of the auditorium walls. In addition, the main lobby plaster work has been repainted in a more subdued palette of colors than originally.
- The commercial-residential section of the Congress Theater retains its brick walls and detailing, including decorative terra-cotta trim. Most storefronts along Milwaukee retain their general original configuration, while storefronts along Rockwell have been remodeled. Second- and third-floor apartment windows have been replaced with one-over-one, double-hung metal sash.

Significant Historical and Architectural Features

Whenever a building is under consideration for landmark designation, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks is required to identify the "significant historical and architectural features" of the property. This is done to enable the owners and the public to understand which elements are considered most important to preserve the historical and architectural character of the proposed landmark.

Based on its preliminary evaluation of the Congress Theater, the Commission staff recommends that the significant features be identified as:

- all exterior elevations and rooflines of the building;
- the theater auditorium, main and inner lobbies, and outer vestibule; and
- original historic theater lighting fixtures, including but not limited to chandeliers, wall sconces, and aisle signs.

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Acknowledgments

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Theatre Historical Society of America: front cover (left, bottom right), pp. 7 (top left, bottom), 9, 10, 13.
From *Atlas of Chicago*: inside front cover.
Chicago Historical Society, Prints and Photographs collection: p. 2 (top).
Terry Tatum, Department of Planning and Development: pp. 2 (bottom), 3.
From *Lost Chicago*: p. 5 (top, bottom right).
From *American Picture Palaces*: p. 5 (bottom left).
From *Chicago Historic Resources Survey*: p. 7 (top right).
From *Chicago Daily News*, September 6, 1926: inside back cover.

The Congress Theater housed both movies and stage acts in its early years, as seen in this newspaper advertisement from 1926.

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